

MEDITATION ON METTA

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Most people who have not practised meditation look upon it as some kind of esoteric eastern ritual which has little practical relevance. This article by Dr. H. Gunaratana argues that contrary to popular belief, meditation is essential for healthy living in modern society. The concern for others and the practice of radiating goodwill to all beings can do much to relieve the world of suffering.

Ed.

Sometimes the practice of Insight meditation may be interpreted to be a kind of practice which makes the meditator a heartless or indifferent being like a vegetable without any love and compassion for other living beings. However, Buddhist meditators are strongly advised by the Buddha to cultivate four sublime states of mind: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. The first of these is so important that the Buddha said that a Bhikkhu can repay his indebtedness to lay supporters if he spends even such a short time as a fraction of a second practising loving kindness towards all living beings. The Buddha perfected it for the attainment of Enlightenment, balancing compassion and wisdom. The first thing the Buddha did every day, even after attainment of Enlightenment, was to reach the attainment of Great Compassion and survey the world to see if there were any beings whom he could help. These four states are called Brahma Vihara or Noble behavior or Noble attitude. The first three of these are strong enough to attain the first three jhanas and the last to attain the fourth jhana. They are so important in the practice of meditation that they are included in the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path. In fact no concentration is possible without these sublime states of mind because in their absence the mind would be filled with hatred, rigidity, anxiety, worry, fear, tension and restlessness.

Preliminary to the practice of these noble states of mind is overcoming our hatred. Hating is a terrible way of wasting one's energy. Hate is compared to boiling water or jaundice. It can destroy your meditation practice. The hateful person is compared to a half burnt log of wood taken from a pyre. Both ends of it are burnt and turned into charcoal and the middle is covered with filth. Nobody would carry it for firewood or for any other purpose because it can dirty the hands of the one who handles it. Similarly the hateful person will not be associated with by anybody. Everybody may try to avoid him. Think of the direct and immediate results of hate. Think of the endlessness of samsara and kamma. Try to build up impartiality towards yourself, a dear one, a neutral

person, and an enemy and then practise loving kindness towards all beings including yourself.

Sometimes some of you may wonder why we have to love ourselves first. Wouldn't that amount to self love and lead to selfishness? However, if you very carefully investigate your own mind you will be convinced that there is none in the whole universe that you love more than yourself. If you say you love so and so more than you love yourself you really are not telling the truth because you can never love anybody in the world more than yourself.

The loving kindness that we want to cultivate as a practice of meditation is not an ordinary love as it is understood in everyday usage. When you say you love so-and-so what you conceive in your mind is an emotion conditioned by a certain behavior of one whom you love. Sometimes you might say, "I love such-and-such a person or such-and-such a thing". What you really mean, perhaps, is that you desire such a person's appearance, behavior, ideas, voice, or overall attitude towards life, and if he or she changes them you may not say you love him or her. If you change your tastes, whims and fancies you may not say that you love so and so any longer. Now, if your love changes in this fashion from time to time then what you called "love" was not true loving kindness but lust, greed, or desire – not love by any means. The kind of loving kindness that we want to cultivate through meditation doesn't have an ulterior motive or an opposite. Therefore, the love-hate dichotomy does not apply to loving kindness, which does not become hate at any time. This loving kindness cultivated through wisdom or mindfulness will not change into hate because of circumstantial changes. It is a natural faculty but hidden under the heap of greed, hatred and ignorance. We have to find it out within ourselves and cultivate it mindfully. Nobody can give it to us. Mindfulness discovers it, cultivates it, and maintains it. "I" consciousness (ahankara) dissolves in mindfulness when loving kindness is discovered.

Because of our selfishness we hate some people. We want to live in certain ways, do certain things in certain ways, perceive things that we desire most. But if we don't obtain them the way we wish them we resent them and become completely unmindful of the fact that those things that we don't desire have the same right to exist as we do.

No human being could be totally devoid of loving kindness, no matter how cruel he or she may appear to be. The loving kindness hidden in each person should be brought out through skillful means. Mindful observation of one's own mental states can pick up this particular wave of mental force and then begin to generate a further force of loving kindness. No other force can bring us happiness as loving kindness does.

When we meditate what happens is that our mind and body becomes naturally, not artificially, relaxed. In contrast, the artificial relaxation of drugs or alcohol disappears when the effect of chemical intake is worn out. It may even cause some side effects such as dependency or some other physical and psychological harm. But the relaxation that we cultivate through the practice of meditation does not produce any side effects. Neither does it do any physical damage nor does it make us dependent upon it.

As our sleepiness and drowsiness are replaced by alertness, doubt by confidence, hatred by joy, restlessness and worry by happiness, not only do we relax but also our hidden loving kindness shows itself, making us more peaceful and more happy. In this state of meditation we gain concentration and overcome our greed. Therefore, to pick up one's own mind wave of loving kindness one must tune oneself up through the practice of meditation.

Meditation destroys hatred and cultivates loving kindness, which in turn supports our practice of meditation. Together these two function in unison, culminating in gaining concentration. Mindful observation of our own individual mental states can show us how certain thought waves are harmful, destructive and make us feel miserable. As we observe our own mental states and as we notice peaceful thought waves and destructive thought waves we also notice our mind rejecting that which is harmful. We don't learn this from books or teachers or friends or enemies; but from our own practice and experience. We learn from this experience to cultivate those thoughts that are peaceful and learn to reject or not to cultivate those that are harmful to our own peace. When the harmful thoughts arise we learn not to entertain them and when peaceful thoughts arise we let them grow and remain in our minds much longer. This way we learn from our own experience how to think more healthily. In this way we condition ourselves to the almost involuntary occurrence of loving kindness in our mind. Then we can cultivate it intentionally. This means that peaceful thought waves that at first appear in our mind by themselves can, later on, be generated intentionally. This way we discover within ourselves that love does not come from outside, though environmental or circumstantial factors play an important role in helping us cultivate loving kindness.

Loving kindness is called Metta in Pali, Maitri in Sanskrit. Perhaps the reason why this emotion is called so is that it is a very warm feeling for beings. Warmth comes from the sun which is called "Mitra" in Vedic literature. One who has a warm heart towards us is called in Pali and Sanskrit "Mitta" or "Mitra" and the nature of "Mitta" or "Mitra" is "Metta" or "Maitri". Just as the sun shines on any object in the world, "Metta" or "Maitri" pervades all beings without any discrimination. The Buddha had cultivated loving kindness to such

an extent that he loved Devadatta, his bitterest enemy who tried many times to kill him, Angulimala, a highway robber who came to kill him, Dhanapala, an elephant that came to kill him, and his own son Rahula alike. It is such loving kindness, guided by mindfulness, that allows us to live in peace and harmony.

The one who practices loving kindness does not get angry if he does not receive any form of favour in return from beings to whom he radiates his loving kindness, because he has no ulterior motive when he radiates loving kindness towards them.

However, loving kindness or Metta cannot be cultivated by mere repetition of words of loving kindness. Repetition of such a formula is very much like repeating a prescription to a patient or repeating a menu in a restaurant. Repeating a list of things will never produce the things themselves. Loving kindness is something we have to cultivate in our own minds by ourselves.

As we pointed out earlier, loving kindness begins to develop through meditation. When the mind is relaxed the meditator is able to forgive and forget any offence committed against him or her. If one tries to practise Metta without tranquility (Samatha) or Insight (Vipassana) meditation, one will not be able to succeed. Love or friendliness cultivated through Samatha meditation is not permanent because Samatha achievements can be only temporary. Friendliness cultivated through Vipassana is perpetual because the qualities cultivated by Vipassana take deep root in one's mind. Vipassana meditation softens the mind, and friendliness, cultivated along with or even after the softening of the mind, will take deep root in the mind.

The Vipassana meditator sees the impermanence in his form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. He compares the changes of these aggregates with those of others. Then he does not see any permanent thing in him or in others for him to hate. If he asks himself whom he hates, he may not find any individual to hate. By the same token he may not find any being towards whom he can cultivate loving kindness, too. All he perceives is the phenomena of changes that take place in his own state of affairs and that of others. This enables him to forgive and forget the offences that others have committed towards him or towards his friends or relatives.

Therefore, although meditation appears to some people as something that is very selfish, it is the real thing that genuinely develops our noble qualities which can promote peace and happiness. Nevertheless this peace and happiness cannot be given to others if they do not prepare the ground for them or if we do not have them within ourselves. That is why we want to cultivate them within ourselves. You cannot teach someone a subject if you do not know it yourself

first. The better you know your subject the better you can serve the world. The better you discipline yourself the better you can discipline the world. While training in your subject you need some practical training, too. There should be people to work with or work for in order to gain experience. So while receiving your own training you train others or while being helped you can help others. Of course you cannot wait until all your training and learning are complete for you to start your teaching. If you try to teach others without having any knowledge of the subject you want to teach you make a fool of yourself. While learning you can teach and while teaching you can learn. In the final analysis all depends on an individual's development and Kamma. If you teach a class you will notice that each and every student's performance is not identical. Even identical twins have different performances in the class taught by you. Individuality is the way of expressing one's own emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual development conditioned by one's own Kamma. Not even the Buddha can intervene in somebody's Kamma. If you do some good Kamma and enjoy its result I cannot steal or take it away by force from you. Neither can I take it away from you even by friendly means nor can you give it to me even if you want to. Even the Bodhisatta does everything for his own salvation first and then he helps the world. If he does not attain enlightenment until everybody else attains it he has a strong desire for the perfection of his own compassion. If you want to be a Buddha by sending everybody else to Nibbana and if I too want to send everybody to Nibbana before I attain Nibbana, none of us will attain Nibbana. Suppose you invite some friends for a party. When they arrive and sit at the dinner table, suppose you were to say: "Friends, I won't eat until everybody else finishes eating", do you think anybody else would start eating? If nobody starts eating your food the food remains on the table. By the same token if you say you don't want to attain enlightenment until you liberate everybody from Samsara, and if everybody wants to become Buddha after sending everybody else to nibbana, do you think anybody would attain Nibbana? What happens to an individual's Kamma? Your mind and my mind are not one and the same. Your Kamma and my Kamma do not become one. The degree of your spiritual development is different from that of mine. The Buddha did not treat living beings as inanimate objects. Also he did not say that we are all created equal. He said all living beings have differences in them. These differences are caused by their Kamma. He asked bhikkhus to think daily that they are the owners of their Kamma. Kamma is their heritage, refuge, protection, guard, and origin, and whatever Kamma an individual commits is his or hers. Therefore, he or she treads the path towards enlightenment at his or her own pace. Some individuals are quick-witted; others are sluggish. Therefore, their attainment of enlightenment comes either fast or slow depending on their spiritual development and maturity of their wholesome Kamma. Individual freedom is most highly respected by the Buddha.

According to the Buddhist theory of cosmology there are many planes of existence. Beings are born in these abode according to their Kamma. Even those who are born in the Brahma realms are born in different Brahma realms according to how they develop the four sublime states (Brahma Vihara) in jhanas. Because of the Karmic differences even the Brahma realms are many. Moreover those who attain supramundane states such as Sotapanna, etc. except the Arahant, also take a certain number of rebirths – according to how much defilement the individual saint has in himself. Therefore, individuality remains and maintains itself throughout the Samsaric existence. Only after attainment of Parinibbana do individuals shed their individuality.

Therefore, everywhere and in everything individuality is more conspicuous than unity. If one tries to save others, then he must try to develop his individuality. He tries to perfect his own compassion, wisdom, generosity, morality, patience, truthfulness, renunciation, loving kindness, equanimity, etc. He cannot make these qualities perfect in others. Without perfecting these qualities nobody can attain enlightenment. Each and every individual has to perfect his or her own perfections. Each and every individual needs an empirical world to practise in and perfect these qualities. One needs a recipient to accept his generous gifts. He needs suffering beings to exercise his compassion; he needs other beings to cultivate his friendly love; he needs other beings to practise his morality because it works best with people; he needs people to practise patience; he needs people to speak the truth, etc. All his qualities can be practised and tested in human society. Therefore, each individual can perfect his qualities in society, not out of society. This way while he becomes perfect or perfects his qualities he can serve his society by teaching other individuals. In society there can be other individuals whose Kamma is ripe for them to undertake similar practice and cultivate their own minds in the same direction. This way is possible and practical. At the same time no one person can or should expect everybody to be treading the path to deliverance at the same speed to attain enlightenment at the same time.

On the other hand, beings caught in the cycle of Samsara at any given moment are countless. Their states of spiritual growth and their Kammass are innumerable. Samsara itself is endless. Beings are being born all the time. Therefore, no one individual can save all beings, nor can all individuals attain enlightenment at the same time, all at one time. The only possibility is the individual's attainment of enlightenment. This means that I liberate myself first and help the individuals to liberate themselves so that whenever their Kamma is mature they will attain enlightenment themselves. I cannot liberate anybody without liberating myself. By the same token we cannot love anybody in the world if we do not love ourselves.

All the four Brahma Viharas begin to unfold in our mind when the mind and body begin to relax. Only in a relaxed state of mind does metta begin to grow. In a tensed state or anxious state of mind none of these noble behavioral qualities arise.

We can see this happening in the practice of jhana or tranquility meditation. In fact the highest wholesome emotion is the sublimated equanimity which arises and matures at the attainment of the fourth jhana and becomes perfect at the attainment of Arahant hood through the practice of Vipassana.